

Urbanek, R.
Jan Zizka

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JAN ŽIŽKA, THE HUSSITE.

(ON HIS QUINCENTENARY).

I.—THE MAN.

To his contemporaries and to succeeding generations Jan Žižka of Trocnov was first of all a great fighter: for this reason perhaps both his friends and opponents noted only the wonderful effects of his achievement, without striving to discover the secret of his success or to investigate his genius as a tactician and a strategist. They almost entirely failed to realise that he was no less gifted as politician and statesman and that he was one of the greatest personalities that Czech history has to show. It is interesting to see how comparatively little the 14th century chroniclers knew of the great man's personal connections with those about him, and how trifling is the information they give us of the man himself and his character. By their omission to preserve for us an account of his character and personality—which could have been so easily obtained in those days—we have been for ever deprived of an invaluable storehouse. They did not trouble about who his parents were, nor how his youth was spent, nor what were the fortunes of his later life. Žižka appears suddenly in the midst of their descriptions of the stirring events of the year 1419, at the very beginning of the upheaval in which he was destined to play the decisive part. For them he was simply a faithful servant of the Lord, "a Czech of knightly rank, right valiant, one-eyed, by name Žižka," who "by the grace of God arose and took the field of battle." M. Vavřinec of Březová, who was best acquainted with Hussite history, knew him as a one-eyed noble attendant of King Wenceslas, a singularly brave and stout commander, a zealous defender of the Christian Faith, and one to whom the peasantry, though but poorly armed, gladly hearkened. The feelings of the people towards him are best shown by the simple 15th century inscription on his portrait: "Our True Brother."

Careful investigation of the sources, of course, tells us more about Žižka, but not as much as we could wish. In his case, as in many others, the sources supply not even a fragmentary answer to the questions we fain would put.

Any enquiry into what would contribute to our knowledge of Žižka's character and views could not pass over his native district—the *milieu* in which were spent his youth, and his desperate struggles as an opovědník. The intimate connection between personality and native environment must not, however, be pushed too far: we must also give its fair share to the factor of individuality, which frequently comes into conflict with that of environment. Such a conflict appears to have existed in the case of Žižka too. It is enough to remember the collisions between him and the Taborites, nor should we forget that in the last years of his life his activities were transferred to Eastern Bohemia, though he did not entirely sever his connection with the Taborites. Hradec Králové was, moreover, his favourite town, and it was there that he was buried. Lastly, his Eastern Bohemian fraternity adopted from him the name of "Sirotci" (Orphans), thus remaining true to his memory and his endeavours. All this shows us how his individuality—which not even in his early years entirely harmonised with his surroundings—and the influence of his varying fortunes and wanderings modified and broadened his outlook. In many respects, then, Žižka emancipated himself from his native Southern Bohemian provincialism, although he never fundamentally contradicted it. Thus, at the glorious close of his fairly long life—he was probably born soon after 1360—he was no longer a typical South Czech, but was the embodiment of an ideal Czech Hussite, a true "Warrior of the Lord."

A comparison between him and the other great Southern Czechs would show us how much of the original Žižka remained in the man as he is known to us from history. The poor Southern Bohemian land, with the lazy swell of its peaceful downs and changing wooded hills and dales, with its green meadows and gleaming ponds, offers no broad vistas and affords no easy livelihood. It compels its children to turn their thoughts to the great questions of life, and the spark of intuition flashes but slowly, though its light is deep and steady. In that small, self-contained world no man recks of life's headlong rush elsewhere, but is soberly content with the restful contemplation begotten of concentrated purpose. Life flows like a quiet, deep stream, and the convictions to which it gives birth are deep-anchored in the soul and defy swift change. A man reared there will defend his material and moral possessions to his last breath and will not lightly give up his rights.

So may we think of young Žižka. Then we can understand

the tough fight waged single-handed by this resolute young nobleman against such powerful adversaries as Henry of Rožmberk and the town of Budějovice. The conditions then prevailing in his native district are an index of the general state of the country and largely explain Žižka's later views and attitude. His small estate was near the confines of Austria, but the might of the Crown was far enough for the lordly licence of the Rožmberks and the swollen conceit of the Budějovice patricians to press heavily upon him. With conditions growing ever worse, his patrimony could hardly support him: he already foresaw the day when it might be added to the fat domains of some great lord or monastery, or grabbed by the rich town merchants, taken from him by forced purchase or perhaps even wrested by violence. His burden must have been still heavier if it is true that he served as a youth in the Royal Court. Surrounded by its pomp and glitter, he must have had occasions in plenty to contrast his new-found experiences with the memories of his Trocnov home, and his direct, forceful nature had perhaps to bear the brunt of many an outburst of baronial arrogance. Injustice and wantonness undoubtedly later became even more familiar to the pious nobleman when he found his adversaries' ranks strengthened by the Germans of Budějovice and the loose-living, worldly monks from the Krumlov monasteries and the more distant Vyšší Brod. These experiences doubtless give the key to Žižka's attitude in after days towards the nobility, the Germans and the carnally minded Church (especially the monasteries). The hazards of life as an opovědník and the share he perhaps took in the earlier struggles between Wenceslas IV. and his barons were a hard school, but one in which he acquired the military experience which afterwards stood him in good stead. He learned to be ready to act with instant decision, and his strong, defiant nature was hardened. His adventurous dealings with highwaymen, who at times were his allies, gave him an insight into the seamy side of life and acquainted him with a variety of types. Many of these men had been driven on to the roads and into their haunts in the woods not by crime but through the injustice meted out to them by others and by the desire for revenge (for justice was then hard to obtain). A keen sense of fair play, so familiar to us in his later career, and sympathy with the weak and oppressed, whose wrongs he took as his own, made Žižka a tower of help and strength.

His sober, but shrewd and penetrating intellect, on which his military genius was based, no doubt greatly developed when

he took service in Poland. New horizons were there opened up to him and, as the future showed, he eagerly took advantage of them. He returned with increased knowledge, political as well as military, strengthened too in his national consciousness, with a deeper understanding of Czecho-Polish relations and a fuller grasp of the dangers from Germany to both Czechs and Poles.

The same rare power of development, the faculty of being able to add unceasingly to his rich and many-sided knowledge, was shown no less strikingly on his return to Bohemia when he again took service under Wenceslas IV. Žižka was now drawn into the powerful current of the Czech religious reformation. His part in the Hus sermons in the Bethlehem chapel at Prague might well be called one of the chief events of those years, although it passed unnoticed in contemporary records. In him the Czech reformation found its Judas Maccabæus, a sure shield to repel all attacks. The simple, fervid soul of the one-eyed courtier was roused by the sweet persuasiveness of Master John Hus. Žižka's piety, which had been content to follow the ordinary dusty, trodden path and had lost some of its freshness, now blossomed out with the blooms of late spring. New passionate yearnings shook off all that was dry and dead, and the grey-haired Hussite, with his whole character rejuvenated, found, after stormy wanderings, in the new faith the peace of mind, the inner content and the new meaning in life for which he had searched so long.

That precious gift which was his, of holding the balance between intellect and heart, was shown most conspicuously in the beautiful harmony of his new faith, a harmony which preserved him from all extremes. He avoided the subtleties of the dogmatic radicals whose endeavour it was to penetrate by reason into the profoundest secrets of life and eternity, and adhered, like many another of the finest Czech reformers, to the orthodox evangelical faith, cleansed of many of the mouldering additions which historical development had brought in its train. His was a faith which, far from being beyond the ken of everyday practical affairs, imbued life with a new and higher meaning and enabled him to fulfil the ideal of a good Christian, a true follower of Christ.

Caring nought for difficulties and sacrifices, Žižka was ready to follow this new light in the spirit of the eloquent preacher of the Bethlehem chapel. Nor was he less prepared, cheerfully and wholly, to devote the remnant of his life to keeping that



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flame alight when critical times arose and when the forces of Church and laity were directed against the adherents of the new religion and morality. His fervour and enthusiasm wrought in him an unexpected change. It not only made him take sword in hand, but also brought out to the full his power and initiative as a leader and organiser. To his contemporaries this fervour was a miracle vouchsafed to him by God for the preservation of the Chosen. The great crisis demanded a great man. Žižka proved worthy of the occasion. Hussite Bohemia found in him her most capable commander, one whose greatness as a man equalled his genius as a leader. This is the key to the invincible spell of this great fighting leader. By subscribing fully to the views of the Reformation, he succeeded in communicating his own strong will to the scattered and defenceless masses and in upholding the rights of the Czech cause.

II.—THE SOLDIER.

The war was not at the outset a symbol to unite all Hussites. Their endeavour to make the Scriptures the basis and rule of life roused among some of the zealous adherents of the Hussite movement very grave doubts, whether it were permitted for a Christian to use the sword in defence of the Faith. If that standpoint had found agreement with the Hussite majority, Bohemia would have been delivered into the power of the Church and her agent, the frivolous heir to the throne, Sigismund, leader of the Crusade which in 1420 rushed down from every side upon Bohemia to exterminate all heretics.

As the Crusaders did not, moreover, draw any clear distinction between Czech heretics and Catholics, the entire nation was threatened with annihilation. Fortunately, however, the Chiliast axiom that Christ was soon to appear as a King on earth and the hope that the great change thus brought about would be accomplished without the sword, were quickly followed by a complete change of front, and a Holy War was proclaimed to be the duty of every good Christian.

Žižka—and with him the majority of his noble friends who belonged to the Reform movement—was of course quite out of sympathy with pacifist maxims. The altered views of the Chiliast radicals, which he had encouraged as much as he could, gave him a welcome opportunity to utilise the religious zeal aroused for the organisation of a military defence corps, and, in the confusion which had ensued, for introducing order and discipline.

That was not so difficult for him, as he had shown such outstanding bravery and talent as a leader in the Prague November battles in 1419, that the people "hearkened unto his word," in the language of the old chronicles. Henceforward the Hussite people made him their favourite leader.

There were special circumstances which had gained for Žižka a commanding position that in ordinary times would have been impossible for a man of his rank, and special methods were also necessary to attain success. His inventive genius, overlooking nothing which might serve his ends, now appeared to the full. In an exceedingly short space of time he created from the peasants and artisans a people's army—a thing quite new to the later Middle Ages. If we read here and there of successful opposition offered in those days by the masses to a typical medieval army of mounted knights, we are in face of rare exceptions: such forces had nothing of the organisation that we find under Žižka.

Out of untrained peasants and town-dwellers to create an army able to withstand and overcome in the open field a force of mounted knights, demanded of the people a high standard of morality and devotion, and of its leaders great ingenuity. The simplest possible kind of weapon was needed—one which could be quickly and easily procured, and one in which the people would have confidence. Discipline and *esprit de corps* were also needed to make a real army out of an inchoate mob. Discipline was an idea unknown to the medieval knight. He fought alone, or at best with a small band of comrades, and so was a unit unconnected with and independent of other units. Žižka's method was a return to the ancient Greek and Roman pattern. To an army consisting of a number of individual duellers he opposed disciplined battalions, which relied on each other and formed part of a great whole, and fought under a single command, the leader's orders being transmitted through officers of different rank. Hence even small Hussite forces conquered by discipline and organisation overwhelming bodies on the other side; for individual acts of gallantry and superior armour were more than outweighed by lack of cohesion and absence of discipline and order.

The habitual instruments in daily use by the peasants and artisans were made to serve new purposes. Žižka attached the greatest importance to waggons, utilising them for tactical operations. Till then the waggon had been chiefly known as a means of conveyance. For military purposes it had been

rarely used, and then only as something immovable—as a refuge resorted to by a retreating force. With Žižka the movable waggon became a regular tactical unit of his army, able not only to offer effective resistance, but also to help in the execution of attacking movements and, on occasion, to participate directly in the attack. At first he used ordinary peasant waggons with the sides and bottoms protected by boards; afterwards the outside or wing-of-battle waggons were undoubtedly improved to some extent to suit the military purposes required of them. When on the defensive, they were parked in such a way as to form a huge rectangle, thus providing Žižka's men with *points d'appui* like those offered by the rampart of a fort. On the march the supply and commissariat waggons were placed between the outside files, and in the event of an unexpected attack by cavalry the wings were able to close up and reproduce the rectangular formation. To do this successfully order was an essential condition, and was still more necessary when the laager moved up for a surprise attack. A sudden sortie of massed bands from the waggons would then turn an attack into a rout, if the enemy had previously been physically and morally shaken by heavy firing. Unless the enemy's discipline was strict, and the leader in effective control of his forces, the effects of such sorties were frequently devastating.

III.—THE POLITICIAN.

Žižka's successes in the field soon brought in their train political influence. The soldier became the politician as a matter of course. In this new domain, too, his breadth of outlook and his acuteness showed to the fullest advantage; he proved, in fact, a much greater politician than many who admired his achievements in other fields were until recently willing to allow. It was inevitable that the organiser of the Hussite forces, the unselfish "Warrior of God," whose simple and deep faith steered him clear of all eccentric extremes, would show similar characteristics in the political arena. He neither lost his keen sense of realities nor sacrificed sound traditions to a hankering after novelty.

It is indicative of his character that Žižka cannot be identified with the Taborite Radicals, though he was the leader of the Hussite party of that town. While he sympathised with them in his earnest desire for simplicity, and in his objection to the

gay and bustling life of the Prague Hussites, he could not accept the extreme views of the Southern Czech innovators; to have done so would have meant in many respects running counter, directly and violently, to previous tradition. Their exaggerated asceticism was not after his heart. On the other hand, he was separated from the Praguers, with whose more moderate religious programme he was very much in accord, by their habit of vacillation and weakness, even on occasions where there was need of unwavering resolution. The more zealous Prague Hussites, whose spokesman was the preacher Jan Želivský, were possessed, it is true, of the determination he loved, but he was repelled by their demagogic methods.

Thus he did not identify himself absolutely with either party, though in many points he sympathised with both. He remained true to the principles which he had absorbed from the sermons in the Bethlehem chapel. He emphasised a high morality of action rather than the ruminating morbid speculation which tried to explore the insoluble riddles of faith. For the same reason the four Articles of Prague, which had expressed even in Hus's time, before the outbreak of hostilities, the fundamentals of the Reform movement, were for him wide enough in their religious scope. His attitude enables us to understand why he was convinced that the Taborites and the Praguers would ultimately find it possible to reconcile their differences by common acceptance of the Prague Articles. The difficulty in the way of an agreement obviously lay in the fact that such a religious programme represented a minimum for the Taborites and virtually a maximum for the Praguers.

Žižka's chief political concern was to induce Prague and Tabor, the two most important Hussite centres, to fight side by side against their common enemies. His principal adherent in Prague was Jan Želivský, whose views approximated to those of the Taborites; but his influence was insufficient to conquer the antipathy felt by the more moderate Praguers for the Tabor camp. Nor could Žižka in his turn quite bridge the gap between the two. Disputations, too, were unavailing, once religious sentiments were inflamed. Nevertheless, when the storm burst and the foundations of the Czech reformation were threatened, Žižka and Želivský succeeded in prevailing upon Prague and Tabor to agree, at least temporarily, on their political and military programme.

The results were far-reaching. Prague was saved in 1420; the Catholic invaders, with Sigismund at the head of their

great army, were for a long time discouraged from making further attempts by their continued defeats and failures, and the enemies at home were either subdued or driven by the threatening situation to compromises which awakened hopes that the Prague Articles would soon be recognised throughout the whole country. Prague assumed the sovereignty in most of the royal towns, and it appeared likely that a city power, similar to the Venetian rule in North Italy, would be created in Bohemia. For this to happen, conciliation and forbearance had to be shown by Žižka. He did not allow himself to be deflected from the common policy by the fact that some of the towns submitted to Prague only in order to escape his power. On the other hand, he proved that he was not a deluded and cruel fanatic bent on a war of extermination. Much of the cruelty urged against him must be attributed to the spirit of the times, nor should it be forgotten that religious wars are great inflamers of passions, and that his opponents, the Roman Catholics, were no less cruel. Žižka agreed to a truce with both Ulrich of Rožmberk and the men of Plzeň. He saved another opponent of the Hussite movement, Bohuslav of Švamberk, by taking him prisoner when his life was threatened at the siege of Krasikov. Let us also remember that the blood shed at the capture of Prachatice and Chomutov was only the sequel of provocative and slanderous attacks—deeply wounding to his religious feelings—made against him by the inhabitants of those two towns. He did not oppose, moreover, the participation of the Catholic Estates in the Čáslav Diet of 1421, nor the admission of some of them, including Ulrich of Rožmberk, to the administrative council. It cannot be denied that, wherever advisable Žižka showed the moderation befitting a politician concerned with the general weal rather than party interests.

The decrees of the Čáslav Diet may well be considered ample evidence of this moderation. Even if only for a time, they again gave ordered government to the harassed country. The other estates and authorities were induced to accept the chief religious demands, the Articles of Prague, which thus became the law of the land. The decree enforcing uniform Church institutions also held out fair hopes that the disorganisation in spiritual affairs would be remedied. King Sigismund, the unworthy heir to the throne, was shorn of his privileges and a vote was passed in favour of renewing negotiations with Poland for another king. If these resolutions had been executed, they would have produced that stability and order in public affairs which Žižka desired.

The eyes of many had turned to Poland and Lithuania before, in days when the Czechs, and Žižka among them, had helped them in their wars against the Order of the Teutonic Knights. This Slavonic trait in Czech politics continued after the war. Great hopes for the furthering of the Hussite movement were bound up with the plan of a Czecho-Polish alliance. Not only would the movement find by that means support in its struggle against Sigismund and his allies, but the recognition of the Czech religious programme in the sister country would also strengthen and extend it. This attempt to unite Bohemia and Poland was certainly praiseworthy, but the dissension between the Hussites and the Roman Catholics made the prospects of success slender. It soon became evident that there were insidious opponents to the union on every hand; not only Poland herself but also those who had mooted the plan in Čáslav, not only the Roman Catholics, but also the foremost pillars and champions of the Tabor party were antagonistic.

Polish-Lithuanian politicians saw in the Czech scheme only a means to gain King Sigismund's compliance in the Prussian question, *i.e.*, in the quarrel with the Teutonic Knights. Consequently, the arrival of Sigismund Korybut as representative of the Lithuanian Grand Duke Vitovt was only a short episode, which was soon followed by disappointment. Korybut's relations with the Roman Catholic opponents of the Hussite movement aroused displeasure in Bohemia, and his rule of violence reminded the Czechs only too much of Sigismund's government. Žižka did not agree with the substitution of a Polish for a Lithuanian candidate, although, in the interests of the better management of the country, he was willing to recognise Korybut's authority. Fresh disillusionments, however, induced him to look round elsewhere for a means of safeguarding and pacifying Hussite Bohemia.

He was too honest to brook either deceit or treachery. Consequently, the thwarting of the Čáslav decrees made him the determined enemy of the "home hypocrites"—whether they were Roman Catholics who denied and broke their agreement with the Hussites as soon as they felt comparatively safe, or whether they were Utraquists, Lords and Praguers anxious to secure peace and prosperity for themselves, and not caring whether they forgot the great cause for which the struggle had been started. Žižka made a real sacrifice to the necessity for better order in the country, by his restraint when the Prague peace party not only deprived Jan Želivský of political influence

but ultimately removed him from their path by a foul and treacherous blow. He also recognised Korybut. But this was still not enough. Even after Korybut had left Bohemia, the Praguers continued to angle for agreement with the Roman Catholic Lords. The promising alliance which early in 1422 had, by Žižka's glorious victory over King Sigismund at Německý Brod, preserved the Czech Hussites, was foredoomed to failure and open war was destined sooner or later to break out between them and Žižka.

Nor was Žižka's authority sufficient even in the Tabor party to maintain the necessary unity in face of foreign danger. Omitting the extreme wing of the Adamites which Žižka annihilated in 1421, the religious dissensions between him and one section of the Taborites were obvious from the outset, and became still more acute by 1422, when the Taborite religious dogmas were stabilised. The divergences were, moreover, increased by political disputes which turned chiefly on the question of the succession to the Crown, and which brought about the secession of Bchuslav of Švamberk and other Taborites who refused to recognise Sigismund Korybut.

This disagreement was adjusted in the beginning of 1423, when the malcontents realised that they had seriously weakened their own side, while in the other party the danger of reaction was growing apace. But Žižka felt the need of more reliable support than that offered by Tabor. At the congress of Německý Brod in the early spring of 1423 he, therefore, formed out of his friends among the Taborites and various groups of the Eastern Czech fraternity of Orel a party of his own, the fraternity called after his death "Sirotci." He thus had a following with whom he was in full agreement, and so was able to adopt the measures he thought fit without having to fear any opposition from his own allies.

In 1423 Žižka undertook a journey to Moravia and Hungary which, apart from its incontrovertible military importance, was of great political value. While striving to spread Hussite principles in Poland too by means of the Polish claim, he was compelled to pay special attention to Moravia. Here, it is true, the movement had from the very first found a fruitful soil; but unfavourable circumstances had prevented it from acquiring sufficient strength to occupy that position to which the numbers and the political importance of its adherents entitled it. Not only was it opposed by the powerful Jan Železný, the Bishop of Olomouc, and the leading German towns, but it also suffered

from the proximity of Hungary and Austria, where Sigismund had an excellent ally in his son-in-law, Albrecht of Habsburg, who frequently intervened on his behalf. For his services, King Sigismund gave him several towns in pledge, and in 1423 invested him with the whole of Moravia, which from time immemorial had formed an integral part of the Czech state. It was on the very eve of this that Žižka, who in the meantime had won a victory over the Prague party at Hořice, undertook his expedition. He penetrated by way of Southern Moravia deep into Hungary, nearly to Esztergom (Gran), thus showing how in the future Catholic Europe would be made tractable. His famous "campaign" was analogous on a large scale to his laager battles with the waggons, which had shown that, for a complete victory, defence alone is insufficient, but must be combined with attack. On his return he was unable to stay long in Moravia and bring effective support to the Hussite movement there, for the situation in Bohemia had in the meantime become worse. His intentions had, however, been only temporarily postponed.

In Bohemia he had to settle matters with the Lords and the Praguers. It was not until he won a victory over the latter at Malešov and marched to Prague itself (1424), that the tide turned and he was able to revert to his original plan. If public events had continued to develop in Bohemia on the same lines, Žižka would have become the military dictator of his country, however reluctant he was to assume that ambitious office. But a reconciliation was effected between the capital and the blind leader through the offices of the young Hussite priest, Jan Rokycana, who followed the example of Jan Želivský in zealously championing the alliance between Prague and Žižka. The alliance might well have profited Sigismund Korybut, who had returned to Prague not long before; for his still recent experiences had taught the young Lithuanian princeling what would have been his position in Bohemia while Žižka was there.

Žižka's dispute with the Taborites and with Prague being settled, he found himself once more, as in the beginning of 1422, at the head of the military forces of the chief Hussite groups. Nothing hindered him from carrying out his intention of the previous year, namely, to undertake an expedition to Moravia, and, by linking up the sister country with the Hussites of Bohemia, to make her a full partner in the movement and its struggles. New prospects were there opened up: a definite solution of the Czech problem might well have been found. Under the guidance of Žižka, firm and resolute but in no way implacable, such a

solution was more likely than later when the *Compactata* were under discussion. But the fateful day, the 11th of October, 1424, put an end to all plans. The sudden death of the blind hero not far from the Moravian boundary, in the open before the fort of Přibyslav, shattered his projects and demolished the great hopes that had arisen. Though something of Žižka's spirit lingered on in what was afterwards accomplished, it was but a weak reflection of what might have been. Not only was it a personal tragedy that Žižka's victory remained inconclusive, but it was also a tragedy for the Hussite movement; for none of his heirs and successors enjoyed that honour and authority which were his. Though many of the Hussite leaders who had been his subordinates learnt to see with his spiritual eyes, yet there was not one of them in whom the true spirit of Žižka survived.

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